

Education committee
Left behind white pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds
9 February 2021

Witnesses:

- Rt Hon. Nick Gibb MP, Minister of State for School Standards, Department for Education
- Vicky Ford MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Children and Families, Department for Education

Overview

In this session the witnesses discussed the situation of left behind white pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, focusing in particular on COVID-19 mitigation measures, nurseries, differences among ethnic groups and government support.

Safety of schools

The Chair Robert Halfon (Con, Harlow) asked the witnesses whether any consideration was being given to opening primary schools after the February half term, given the Public Health England advice.

Nick Gibb said that the reason why schools were closed on the 15 January had nothing to do with whether schools were safe or not. The system of controls that schools implemented when open was about hygiene, social distancing, ventilation i.e. it was designed to minimise the risk of transmitting the virus within the environment. However, the reason why schools were closed was to minimise movement in the community, as an additional measure of reducing the transmission in the community. Therefore, the plan was that schools would not re-open before the 8 March and that in that week beginning with the 22 February further announcements about the roadmap for emerging from the lockdown would be made.

Extension of school day

The Chair asked whether any consideration has been given to extending the school day to increase educational attainment and enhance the positive impact on mental health.

Gibb agreed that many academies had extended the school day and as a result had driven standards up in those schools. They had appointed Sir Kevin Collins as education recovery commissioner, who would be looking at all these proposals to ensure that young people caught up given that, as a government, they were determined that no children or young person would have a long-term detriment to their life chances as a result of this pandemic. That was why they had allocated £1.3bn of funding to the catch up premium and the national tutoring programme.

State-maintained nurseries

Fleur Anderson (Lab, Putney) asked a question on the access to the catch-up fund for state-maintained nurseries.

Vicky Ford said that they had kept nurseries and pre-schools open during this pandemic and this lockdown and that the catch-up programme was focusing on those who had missed out on their education. However, the youngest children could not be cared for online, which was why nurseries and pre-schools remained open and why the catch-up programme did not apply to them.

An important part of the catch up was the NELI programme which was focusing on children of a certain age who had fallen behind in their communication and language skills. Over 40 percent of schools across the country had signed up for the NELI programme, meaning that it was one important part of the programme. In terms of the wider catch up, it was important that it be used for both well-being and education.

Decision-making

The Chair asked Gibb whether he had a preference for extending the school day or curtailing some holidays and whether this decision would be made entirely by Sir Kevin.

Gibb said that Sir Kevin would advise ministers who in turn would decide on the best approach. He was personally open to all solutions, and believed it was important to “leave no stone unturned” in trying to help young people catch up from the lost education. He noted that, however good remote education was, it could not compare to teaching in class.

Lessons from the pandemic

Jonathan Gullis (Con, Stoke-on-Trent) asked what lessons could be learnt from COVID-19.

Gibb agreed that there was evidence of lost learning, but also of the possibility for fast learning and catching up from this past autumn. A lot had been happening during the pandemic, and lessons could be learned. They would look at all ideas to make sure children caught up.

Ford added that a crucial element was rolling out the holiday activities and food programme. These helped keep young people engaged in activities during the summer period and bring them back in September more prepared to learn.

Steps made

Ian Mearns (Lab, Gateshead) asked what had been done to support the attainment of disadvantaged white pupils since 2014.

Gibb said that poverty, and not the colour of the skin, was the issue. Since 2010 they had been focusing on making sure that young people coming from a disadvantaged background, regardless of the colour of their skin, had a much better quality education. White disadvantaged children would also benefit from this and the attainment gap would be closing by 13 percent in primary schools and by 9 percent in secondary schools.

Differences between ethnic groups

Tom Hunt (Con, Ipswich) spoke about the concerning statistics that showed that those from white underprivileged backgrounds were doing academically worse than those from other backgrounds who also had to live with socio-economic disadvantage.

David Johnston (Con, Wantage) asked if there was a case for putting a greater emphasis on destinations data of schools.

Gullis asked why white children left on free school meals were doing so much worse compared to non-white pupils on free school meals, if this was just about poverty and income.

Gibb said that this was not a taboo subject, and he acknowledged the data that showed these differences. However, the solutions to all these problems were the same, whatever background the children came from, because when these solutions were applied the attainment gaps closed, regardless of the children's background or the colour of their skin.

Rural areas

Caroline Johnson (Con, Sleaford and North Nykeham) asked how they identified disadvantaged children in rural areas.

Gibb answered that the low expectations were not confined just to inner cities, but could also happen in rural or coastal areas. They were focusing on this and the EBacc was focusing on this. He agreed that they needed to have a stretching curriculum for all children, from all backgrounds, because it kept the opportunities open. In terms of higher education, they had record numbers of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds going to universities. But it was also important to make sure that disadvantaged young people from all backgrounds were also well represented in the most selective of those universities.

The Chair commented that white disadvantaged children were even more under-represented in universities, and most likely to drop out once starting their university courses.

Gibb said that throughout this session he had been trying to show that the government had been addressing this since 2010. All the reforms, some of which had been met with fierce resistance, were resulting in better achievement levels for all children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Department's work

Mearns asked a question on the department's work on improving attainment levels.

Ford said that many studies showed income as the best marker for attainment levels. This was why they were using the free school meals marker to drive the pupil premium. The pupil premium had made a massive change in the last decade. The January census would need to be number-crunched and published shortly.

Home environment

Apsana Begum (Lab, Poplar and Limehouse) asked a question about the influence of family instability and the home environment in the attainment gap between disadvantaged white pupils and their peers.

Gibb said that the home environment was extremely important, and it was the role of education to overcome that. He spoke about the notion of academic resilience, which was the ability of one to excel regardless of their socio-economic background, which had fallen for students from a disadvantaged background. They wanted to ensure that the school environment was designed in such a way that it allowed pupils to overcome difficult home environments.

Child poverty and austerity

Kim Johnson (Lab, Liverpool, Riverside) commented that child poverty had increased because of austerity in the last 10 years, and asked the witnesses to explain this in terms of education attainment for the most disadvantaged.

Gibb said that this went beyond the brief of schools. His objective was that, regardless of the level of poverty in a country, there should not be “a poverty of low expectations”. He believed that the cycle of poverty could be broken by ensuring that pupils were properly educated and equipped to fulfil their potential, whatever that may be.

Ford said that over the last 10 years the Government had done a huge amount to address those on lower incomes, by increasing the living wage, reducing the tax burden, and putting in more financial support for them during the COVID-19 pandemic. In terms of children having access to food, they had put a massive project in so that any family who was struggling during the pandemic had access to food support, fuel support over this difficult winter. This was available through the local authority.

Johnson commented that despite all this, poverty was increasing.

Ford answered that the attainment of young children had improved dramatically over the last 10 years.

White privilege

Hunt asked about the barriers children faced, and whether white pupils from disadvantaged were privileged in any way. He referred to one charity which was sending guides to such families explaining white privilege.

Ford said that the important thing was to ensure that those from a disadvantaged background and all backgrounds were supported. She did not think that children should be told that the colour of the skin was the cause for some behaviours.

Hunt insisted that disadvantaged white families should not be told that they enjoyed white privilege.

Gibb said that the key to all this was developing the young people’s intellectual capabilities, making sure they were reading enough and were taught a varied and deep curriculum.

No missing out

Christian Wakeford (Con, Bury South) asked what could PHE and the departments do to make sure that no children missed out.

Ford said that they had worked with the chief nurse to make sure that health workers would not be redeployed during this lockdown and would continue their visits during the winter. This was extremely important for the early checks and identifying early children at risk of harm. They had also worked to keep mother and baby groups open as much as possible to support mums with their wellbeing. They tried to keep early years open because it was extremely important for a child’s development and education.

Career and youth services

Anderson asked the witnesses to assess the importance of career and youth services and their contribution to this subject.

Gibb said these were important for pupils to make the right choices after the age of 16. There was also an issue of aspiration, and they wanted to do their best to allow young people to see the wide array of careers there was.

Anderson asked if there was an issue with receiving this advice from the outside.

Gibb said that the quality of these services varied, and they understood the value of good career advice. Despite the fact that teachers knew their pupils, only a specialist in this field would know what opportunities would be available in a modern economy.

Ford recommended the committee look at other steps made to improve aspirations and outcomes, such as introducing the T Levels, apprenticeships, the Kickstart programme.

Anderson said that 1,000 youth clubs had closed in the last decade, so there was a worrying trend about working on aspirations, with families and schools locally.

SEND

Hunt asked how a third national lockdown had affected children with SEND.

Ford said that currently the attendance schools for those with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCP) was about 36 percent. She was meeting regularly with different special schools across the country in order to understand their issues. There was much higher attendance now that during the first lockdown, and they were encouraging schools to work with parents in order to decide whether children should be in school.

Nurseries

Anderson asked the witnesses if they had an overall assessment of nurseries that would allow the Government to identify those at risk of failure.

Ford said that she was in close contact with Early Years organisations and that the Department monitored the attendance numbers very closely. They had put in unprecedented support for the Early Years sector, continuing to fund the free childcare entitlements and to ensure easy access to the COVID-19 furlough or the self-employment scheme. Next year they would increase the early funding rates for local authorities, so that the two-year entitlement would increase by at least 8p/year and that for 3-4 years by 6p/year.

SEND review

Johnston a number of questions about the SEND review.

Ford said that the SEND review would be published in spring. It needed to be done in a way that allowed her to work with families and parents in a coproduced way in order to understand the dynamics at hand better. The key priorities were improving the outcomes for children with SEND, finding a way to improve the experience of the system (such as reducing bureaucracy), bringing in intervention and support in mainstream as well, and making the system more financially sustainable.

Food insecurity

Johnson asked how would the Government tackle food insecurity, which impacted on education attainment.

Ford said that there had been no profiteering on the back of their contracts for food supplies. At the moment, they were going through a public procurement exercise in case they needed to keep the voucher scheme going for longer. Unfortunately, they had been unable to do this at the beginning of the pandemic, because it would have delayed food supplies to those most in need.